

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN HUMAN CULTURAL AND SOCIAL EVOLUTION

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“Les hommes ont mépris pour la religion; ils en ont haine, et peur qu’elle soit vraie.”
Blaise PASCAL, *Pensées* 1662 (§27).

“... the inherent pain of consciousness...”
Eugene MARAIS, *The Soul of the Ape*, 106.

In his role as Reg, in *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*, John Cleese famously asked, “What have the Romans ever done for us?” The same may be asked of religion, as a dimension of human culture which has long proved controversial, which has its detractors and supporters, but is under threat in the contemporary world more from indifference and secularism than overt hostility, particularly in the West.

Recognising the problematic nature of religion, some modern states are formally secular. Critics of religion have no problem in finding evidence that it can be socially divisive, that it conflicts with many moral values, over such issues as the suppression of women’s rights, persecution of people of LGBT (variant) sexual orientation, and connivance in child abuse; it has exercised a totalitarian control of whole societies across millennia, and endorses a broadly authoritarian view of government, opposed to democratic values. But these faults are also common features of secular societies. They represent the hallmarks of *la condition humaine*.

My purpose here is simply to make an initial point, that religion is not an unqualified force for good in society. But as the sequel will demonstrate, I hope, nor is it to be dismissed as it sometimes is, as superstition and nonsense, a relic of the past. For better or worse, it has been integral to our very constitution as human beings.

In the recent past, the rise of modern academic thinking, by relentless questioning and analysis, has enabled us to reach a better understanding of religion. And while Pascal’s observation (cited above) rings true for many people, and secularism has become the dominant culture in the Anglo-Saxon world, and to a lesser throughout the industrialised world, religion itself plays a vital part in the life of all human societies, even those where it is openly challenged. In many parts of the world, its truth-claims are not questioned.

Religion, having played a crucial role in the overall development of human consciousness from the earliest times, tends to provide and embody the basis for moral values, tempering the more destructive tendencies of societies. And it is this integrative role which I am surveying here.

I should perhaps begin by attempting a definition of religion. This is not as easy as it may first appear. To be valid, a definition must be universal. One which excludes those believed by one community to be in error, as in the assumption that one religion is inherently superior to others, and that one’s own religion is really the only “true” one, cannot stand. We shall return to the problem of truth-claims later on in this discussion. Every individual scholar will offer his or her own definition.

The safest definition will say the least, since as soon as it becomes involved in particular details, it will tend to disqualify systems that do not conform.

We seek, then, a fairly narrow, minimal definition, as follows.

Religion is a useful term for the collectivity of the following aspects of a society:

1: **an overall cosmology** (invariably a non-scientific one, because science is a very modern phenomenon);

2: very commonly, but not invariably, **a belief in supernatural beings** (singular or plural), who are usually perceived as having personality;

3: **ritual forms** to express and reinforce the tradition, resolve social tensions by rites of purification, and mark the transition-points of individual lives (“rites of passage”); and

4, **narratives**, oral or written, embodying the values, prescriptions and traditions of the believing community.

5: it is in essence a **social phenomenon** rather than an individual one, and involves feelings at least as much as reason.

Religion is of great interest as a topic in all the social sciences: Anthropology, Archaeology, Psychology, Religious Studies, and Sociology. They all recognise its central importance for the study of our species. It has a less central but still important place in other branches of the humanities, languages, literature, music, fine art and so on. All these disciplines tend to study it from an “etic”, that is, objective, perspective: they view it neutrally, generally dispassionately and without invidious value-judgments.

On the other hand Theology, the discipline normally pursued by those within a tradition, is widely studied from an “emic”, that is, involved and subjective perspective. Music and Fine Art probably have a foot in this dimension too, and their common bond is the emotional or “spiritual” engagement which each brings to bear, since like Theology they are concerned with the inner life of people.

These terms, “emic” and “etic”, are anthropological jargon for the “insider” and “outsider” views of religion (Pike 1999). My concern here is primarily the etic perspective, but many scholars of religion are probably motivated in part by an emic element, in addition to their natural fascination with the discipline. Striking the balance is the trick.

The topic under discussion here arises from a concern to explain religion, neither in a dismissive sense, as a symbol of human immaturity, in order to explain it away; nor in any reductionistic sense, as though it is merely a sub-division of some other aspect of human nature and social development. It cannot be explained simply in a functional sense, as the cement of society, nor in a jaundiced assessment of human nature, as the apotheosis of human gullibility. Nor is it adequately defined in the Marxist view, as an anaesthetic against the pains and misery of life, the “opium of the people” (cf. Marais citation above). All these evaluations, many others, and more variants, have concerned scholars for years, and there is no consensus. Theologians will generally give very different accounts from Anthropologists. And in case there is a temptation to settle for an uncomplicated, sentimental account, such as the Hippie movement’s assertion of the 1960s, that it is all about universal love and peace, it would be quite unwarranted to claim for it as a matter of right the moral high ground of any society, because some of the worst excesses of human cruelty and savagery have been carried out in its name.

We are probably agreed that a working definition, as offered above, is important to enable us to examine it in a civilised manner, observing the phenomenologists' virtue of *epoche* (ἐποχή). We have to begin with an account having a universal basis, on which foundation cultures within prehistory (= preliterate history) and history could build their particular superstructures, such as Christianity, which reflect their own historical experience. The one thing any comprehensive perspective of the diversity of religions teaches us, it is that they are all, without exception, historically conditioned, and reflect the particular experiences of their adherents. From the etic perspective, we cannot simply accept the ancient Sumerian observation that “kingship was lowered from heaven”, and adapt it to religion as a universal. That is the emic perspective.

So I begin with an observation of David-Lewis-Williams, who specialised in the religion of the San, a people of Namibia. He wrote (2002: 144) that:

San religion is built around belief in a tiered universe. As do other shamanistic peoples throughout the world, the San believe in a realm above and another below the surface of the world on which they live... Concepts of a tiered universe are, of course, not restricted to shamanistic religions. Heaven above, Hell below, and the level of anxious humanity in between appear in one form or another across the globe.

As a hunter-gatherer society—though now largely sedentarised—the San are suitable candidates for reflecting the least-developed form of religious outlook to which we have direct access, so long as we do not make excessive claims.

The three-tiered cosmos referred to here was more or less universally believed in antiquity, and still forms the basis of religious rhetoric in many traditions. Lewis-Williams' “anxious humanity” sought ways to escape this prison-house, an emancipation which was believed to be achieved by shamans, the earliest ritual specialists.

The hint, in his description, of people aware of shortcomings and uncertainties, at the mercy of forces beyond themselves, is the basis of Rudolph Otto's famous account, in his book *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), which, as its subtitle indicated, attempted to analyse what he called the “irrational” factor in religion. The fundamental element in religion, according to his approach, is the human sense of creatureliness, and of utter dependence on a greater external power, experienced, in Otto's term, as “the numinous”. The shamans, still present in modern pre-industrial societies such as the San and those of the arctic lands of Eurasia, claimed to have undertaken transcendent journeys, visiting both the underworld and the heavens, or the end of the world, where they gained insights into a spiritual dimension, enabling them to guide their communities through difficult times. This archaic pattern was also found among the early kingship systems of the ancient Near East, in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Anatolia and the Levant, where it was developed at the dawn of the metal ages (by the end of the fourth millennium BC) into the basis for political power, the king through his priestly and prophetic agents having a monopolistic channel to the gods. In the Levant it characterised the ritual life of kings in several small kingdoms, Ugarit, Israel and Judah (where the prophetic community to an extent achieved autonomy) and their neighbours. A similar pattern obtained in China, India, the kingdoms of South-east Asia, and probably elsewhere, where records do not survive. An important point about the experiences underlying these religious patterns of thought, scholars have emphasised, is that they are *sui generis*, deriving directly from human neurological structures—that is, at a deeper level than

the psychological—and their use as adaptative tools in religious and social contexts was secondary. But their dynamics suited them perfectly for this secondary role.

Structured religion, in the service of the incipient state, served as the “metaphysics” of the community, validating ritual and moral traditions, and incidentally enhancing the power of kings and priesthoods. This had further benefits, in that economies could develop in stratified societies, trade enhanced understanding between communities and the exchange of ideas. Much of this happened at a relatively unconscious level, that is, without deliberate reflection on the implications of religious beliefs, and with no conscious sense of tension between religion and other aspects of culture, such as politics. In some instances, notably the Central and South American pre-Columbian empires, the pathology of religion became manifest in the way the entire *raison-d’être* of the state seemed to be for the waging of war, for the provision of prisoners as sacrificial victims for the gods.

We may ask, how did all this come about? How did religion become the dominant feature of all ancient cultures? The idea of engagement with the world as a constraint on human freedom was well stated by Peter Berger (1973: 19):

Man manufactures a tool... once produced, the tool has a being of its own that cannot be readily changed by those who employ it. Indeed, the tool (say, an agricultural implement) may even force the logic of its own being on its users... The same objectivity... characterizes the non-material elements of culture as well. *Man invents a language and then finds that both its speaking and his thinking are dominated by its grammar. Man produces values and discovers that he feels guilt when he contravenes them. Man concocts institutions, which come to confront him as powerfully controlling and even menacing constellations of the external world.*
(my emphasis)

The principle encapsulated here may be said to control everything we have to say about religion, and indeed about all cultural forms (“artefacts”), because it is a social phenomenon, and therefore conforms to social demands, beyond the control of individuals. The moral ambiguity noted above is the price to be paid for having it: religion, like language, calls the shots so long as there is a compliant community. A reformer or charismatic can of course always begin anew, but old baggage will be carried in train. The pathology which sometimes occurs is well illustrated in the pre-Columbian American contexts just mentioned, in contemporary radical Islam, with its willingness to kill any infidel, or in settler colonialism as practised in the Americas, Australia or Palestine. The last-mentioned even has deep biblical roots in Deuteronomy 7, with its commandment to destroy the Canaanites.

I turn now to some of the structural forms of human experience, which have found expression in religious systems.

Placement: Orientation (Wyatt 1996a, 2001a: 33-52)

From its earliest beginnings, an important function of religion has been to place a community and its members firmly on earth, within a territory they can call their own. In the light of our discussion so far, we can assert the basic human need for orientation, and the religious underpinning which reinforces it. With the beginning of sedentarisation of human societies some twelve thousand years ago, this concern, already well-developed in earlier communities, would have taken on an even more dynamic force, as people competed for permanent lands, and for their resources (Cauvin 1997). “Orientation”, or more precisely what has been called “canonical orientation” (Lyle 1990)—for there is also a wider, non-religious vocabulary—is a basic element in the maintenance of this imperative. It is a linguistic example of

Berger’s point: that language, verbalising the experience, in turn comes to control the experience, for we inhabit a “linguistic universe”.

The clearest example for presentation, in terms of the transparency of its terminology, is perhaps Hebrew. Consider the following terms and their meanings:

HEBREW TERM	BODILY SENSE	DIRECTIONAL SENSE	TEMPORAL SENSE
<i>qedem</i>	face	east	past
<i>'aḥar</i>	back	west	future
<i>šēmō'el</i>	left	north	—
<i>yāmīn</i>	right	south	—

We see here an extension outward from the subject into a spatial dimension (the world I experience), and then again, metaphorically, into a temporal one (my movement through time). Thus I, the subject, am at the centre of a world of space and time, which I construct from my personal experience, and which in turn contains and constrains me. We are all doing this, and a common terminology enables us to coordinate our efforts, so that the experience is both personal and communal.

This may not appear to be specifically religious, apart from in its (secondary) application to ritual practice. But this intuition is confirmed by its further application to religious architecture, illustrating our perception of space. Not only are many religious buildings modelled ultimately on the human body—seen extended over the ground as the plan, seen most clearly in Egyptian temples and Christian churches, and in our very sense of self: Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 146* begins: “Poor soul, the *centre* of my sinful earth”—but they are essentially extensions of the body, imposed upon the earth, and thus symbolically taking possession of it and sanctifying it. The *Puruṣa* myth from India (*Ṛgveda* 10.90), linked to a primordial human sacrifice (whether historically real or symbolic), spells it out quite explicitly, as do the associated ritual texts (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 13.6.1-2), as cosmogonic: the very substance of the world, and its spatial and temporal aspects are products of his cosmic body. Examples of the same symbolic thinking are found all over the world.

The basis of this orientational language, deeply embedded in the Indo-European and Afro-Asiatic language families, and possibly universal, is an archaic, even pre-human, practice of facing the rising sun in the morning. Writing in his 1937 ethnological study, *The Soul of the Ape*, Eugene Marais described (perhaps with a touch of anthropomorphism!) a troupe of baboons who reacted, apparently with a sense of deep melancholy, to the setting sun. Almost as a mirror image, baboons, representing the hours of the night, also appear in the vignettes in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, greeting the rising sun with joy, in a primordial form of orientation. The image is undoubtedly based on observation of primate behaviour.

The feature of this process which I want to emphasise here is the implication of facing into the past. The idea still persists in the English expression “(to) turn one’s back on the past”, as though facing it was at one time considered the norm. It means that events in the past are visible, if only in the mind’s eye, and can be reflected on, and most importantly, used as a basis for making decisions about the future, which lies hidden *behind* the subject. “Seeing” and “knowing” share the same root in Indo-European languages (e.g. Sanskrit *vid*, Greek εἶδω < οἶδα and Latin *video*—and compare Hebrew *yādaʿ*, “know”!). We see *and* understand, constructing our future, *and our meanings*, from our past. We use our experience of the past to make sense of the present and prepare for the future. (I shall return to the terminology of knowledge at the end.)

A science of omens developed in the Near East, in which memories of past events, such as eclipses, comets, curious animal- or bird-behaviour, which had been associated with catastrophes—floods, famines, military disasters, the death of kings—were taken as warnings of impending repetitions. The study of the entrails of sacrificial animals—now firmly within the religious sphere—had a similar function. The interpreters were ritual specialists, who recognised and interpreted the signs.

The literature of the ancient world was originally transmitted orally, and then in written form, preserving the wisdom of the past for use by later generations. The most valuable parts, the ritual prescriptions, temple hymns, myths, wisdom texts, historiography, gradually came to be regarded as not just sacred, but sacrosanct, and formed the canonical scriptures of various religious groups. So the *authoritative* record of the past was available for continued scrutiny by subsequent generations.

Perhaps significantly, the east is not where the gods were generally apprehended. In the Near Eastern systems, reflected in the biblical usage, they dwelt in the north, most famously on Mount Saphon, Jebel el Aqra in Syria, Greek Κάσιον, a site which achieved international prestige throughout the east Mediterranean world. The north is the left side, as we have seen, and the gods' voices were experienced (according to Jaynes 1976: 102-8) in the left ear, and processed in the right cerebral hemisphere, from where they *spoke* to the left hemisphere. Thus auditory experience appears to have had priority over visual experience. However, images of gods, serving as the focus for the comprehensive, especially the visual, experience, were frequently placed on the east side or end of temples, where image and worshipper made eye-contact (Jaynes 1976: 165-75). Even if Jaynes' analysis be rejected, we still see here evidence of the moral role of the left-right (north-south) axis working in tandem with the temporal face-back (east-west) axis, in the development of an enriched consciousness.

Myth

There is a distinctive quality to ancient literature. It is all broadly religious, at least down to *ca* 500 BC. The aspect I wish to address here is the one usually treated under the umbrella term “myth”. This, like “religion”, has taxed the minds of its interpreters, though it is fair to say that there is a broad consensus that it is a narrative literary genre, distinct, say, from epic, saga or history. However, the term is commonly used to cover such a wide variety of literary forms, ranging from the trivial to the sublime—to say nothing of from the entirely false to the supremely true—that I have preferred to see it as a mind-set (Wyatt 1996b: 373-424, 2001b, 2008). While I am happy to go along with the common view that it is narrative (as against ritual, legal, or hymnic forms), I think of it not so much a literary type as the entire emic mode of thinking, when expressed in narrative form. To live within a religious system, that is, “emically”, is to inhabit the world of myth, which is not in any serious usage to be contrasted with truth. We shall return to this issue below.

While anthropologists, sociologists and historians of literature and religion delight in myth as a rich source of material for analysis, many biblical scholars have had a problem with it. At times they have, perhaps unconsciously, resorted to sleight of hand. Thus, by defining myth as “stories about gods”, Otto Eissfeldt considered it entirely proper to deny that biblical literature used myth, though he constantly back-tracked when faced with overt cases of alien influences, a parade example being the flood story of Genesis 6-8, generally conceded to be indebted to the Babylonian *Atrahasis* and *Gilgamesh* stories. His denial was on the basis that the Old Testament is

consistently monotheistic, and is therefore excluded from the definition “stories about gods”. This in my view was a delusional and even dishonest position to adopt: the definition was formulated explicitly to exclude the Old Testament. Those biblical scholars whom I have in mind, who perhaps significantly have been overwhelmingly Protestant, made the foundation of their position the historical nature of the Old Testament writings, and developed from it an entire philosophy of history, going far beyond the biblical witness, and imposing on it alien categories of thought (notably Gerhard von Rad 1957-60). The tendency was to gloss overtly mythical material in the Old Testament, such as the creation and flood narratives, as “demythologised”. Just to confuse matters, they used this term in a way entirely opposed to the way in which New Testament scholars were using it as explanatory, translating the ancient forms to a modern idiom.

Memory and Ritual

The human faculty which is crucial in order to benefit from the cultural and religious values of ritual and narrative is memory. If memory goes, our entire personality dissolves. Memory of the community narrative is what makes us social beings. Many scholars have examined human memory. Merlin Donald (1991: 148-53) traced its prehuman antecedents, seeing a development from “procedural”, through “episodic”, to “semantic” memory, the last being restricted to the hominins, of whom *Homo sapiens* is evolutionarily the most recent. Humans alone are conscious of the passage of time, and through memory, can live in the past, recalling earlier events. Indeed, through social activity, with ritual, language and myth in operation, they can appropriate the memories of past generations, with what has been called “collective”, “social” or “prosthetic” memory (Halbwachs 1925, 1950, Connerton 1989, Landsberg 1995). A powerful example of this occurs in the Jewish Passover rite (*Exodus* 12:26-27), when the son asks, “What does this rite mean?”, and his father replies, “It is the sacrifice of Yahweh’s Passover, when he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, to smite the Egyptians, and rescue our families”.

“Remembering” strictly means reconstructing, putting back the scraps of information processed and retained by the brain into a coherent form. Ritual is essentially the repetition of a stylised form of activity, which in conforming to an archetype is believed to “re-member” it, and perpetuate it in the continuing life of the community. So ritual is itself a form of remembering, as in the eucharistic formula “Do this in remembrance of me”; it is “the performance of memory”. Myth has the same capacity: the narrative, as essentially archetypal, is able to renew, to reconstruct the pattern. This elegant neural and then social process may be said, in a manner of speaking, to reverse the arrow of time (Wyatt 2008: 171), thus overcoming its natural entropy. We see in eschatological systems the fulfilment of this belief, as in the Christian expectation of “a New Heaven and a New Earth”, and Paradise restored (*Revelation* 21-22). Religion here plays an entirely transformative role.

Theism

Ritual and myth, respectively behavioural and verbal discourses, and expressions of religious experience, are independent of the existence of gods. Religion does not *require* gods, as is easily demonstrated by various non-theistic manifestations of religion in Hindu and Buddhist experience. And yet the overwhelming majority of religions throughout history have been theistic. So we have here an important aspect of religion.

When did ideas of God, initially perceived and experienced in pluralistic form, first develop? Perhaps a good starting-point for understanding theism is the study of Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds* (1993). Fully aware of Xenophanes' critical view of anthropomorphic theologies, the famous passage on the nature of the gods of horses or cattle (Xenophanes, *Fragments* 15, 16), Guthrie proposed that the principle of anthropomorphism had important explanatory value, relating to the structuring of the human mind. By this he meant that it was a survival strategy to attribute anthropic qualities to the realities encountered by primitive men, hostile environmental and meteorological factors, wild animals, numinous places (such as deep caves). This made them amenable to engagement in dialogue and negotiation.

Julian Jaynes, mentioned above, used *the Iliad* and *the Odyssey* as illustrative of two successive stages in the development of human consciousness: the former, more archaic, being in his view strictly unconscious and "bicameral" in which the neural processes of the right hemisphere of the brain functioned as messengers, and those of the left as hearers, so that the human subject heard voices giving him or her instructions—rather like a modern schizophrenic—and reacted automatically and unthinkingly. These voices, comparable to the external "numinous" of Otto's analysis, were those of the gods, who were, he proposed, "organizations of the central nervous system" (1976 [1982]: 74). Forty years on, with some qualification, this remains a brilliant insight into the neuropsychological basis of religion. As may be imagined, Jaynes has been severely criticized, that being the nature of scientific debate. Neuroscience has certainly moved on since. But his theory retains powerful explanatory force, for instance, in the use of images in ancient cults, in which the material form of the supernatural served as the medium for transmitting the divine will to his or her devotees. Jaynes cited the "eye idols" of Bronze Age Syria, which acted iconically, he suggested, as the divine focus, so that the devotee could speak to the deity "face to face". Strikingly, this is the very phrase used of Moses in *Exodus* 33:11 :

Yahweh spoke to Moses face to face (*pānîm 'el-pānîm*), just as a man speaks to his friend.

The Hebrew expression *lipnê-yhwh* ("before the face of Yahweh"—*Genesis* 3:8, *Psalms* 17:2, 51:11, 95:2 etc.) denoted the presence of the deity in the cult of ancient Israel, which indicates how long the language of human-divine encounter could persist, no doubt long after its primitive, quasi-physical aspect had been thoroughly refined. Here we see religion serving in human decision-making procedures: the deity serves as a symbolic *alter ego* (in an internal dialogue between the hemispheres of the brain), a function still performed in dreams and other intuitive processes, in which even the secular person will speak of clarification suddenly occurring during reverie, even citing the Muse as having suddenly spoken to break an impasse. The Unconscious is a speaking god for all times and places!

Truth

Let us now turn again to truth. This is a citation from a book I wrote twenty years ago (Wyatt 1996b: 384):

If we ask, is this or that religion "true", the honest response is surely that any religion is true to its participants, because religion is the totality, in any given cultural context, of those symbolic constructions of the mind and actions which validate life, and permit a more or less adequate response to the prevailing environmental, political and existential

world. But to extrapolate “truth” in a cognitive sense from such a network of symbols, so as to falsify a rival set of constructions, seems to me an absurd exercise.

The Greek word for truth is ἀληθεία. To see what this means, recall that according to the Greek way of death, you crossed the Styx (“Horrible”) in Charon’s boat, paying him for his trouble. You then drank from the waters of Lethe, and forgot all your troubles. *Lethe*: “forgetting”. *A-lethe*, ἀλήθεια, not forgetting, remembering. For the ancient Greeks, “truth” was remembering, memory. And it is the case both for individuals and for nations that memory of the personal or national past is essential to the maintenance of identity. Much of our national memory may be fanciful, mythical in the dismissive sense, unless we search well below the surface. And where myth and history must conflict is when new historical insights correct mythic misperceptions. In the United Kingdom we have a national myth about the benign nature of the British Empire. Uncomfortable “truths” (I use the term advisedly) are now emerging as to how brutal it often was, all over the world. One of the greatest tools of empire, we learn, was the Maxim machine gun (Herbert Cadell, *The Song of the Modern Mars*, 1900). Belgium has a glorious history in the Congo? Not according to Adam Hochschild (author of *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 1998)! A record of America’s enlightened intervention in the world, in addition to the benign aspects, is a catalogue of deceit, brutality and shameless self-interest. The foundation of Israel, the provision of “a land without a people for a people without a land”, is a crafty euphemism for ethnic cleansing every bit as brutal as the biblical narrative or the Balkan wars. Ask any Palestinian. The French Revolution, harbinger of liberté, égalité and fraternité, was a time of unimaginable horror. History is like that. We can go round the world, and find that every nation has skeletons in the cupboard. At times the function of myth seems to be to keep them there, for as T. S. Eliot remarked (*Burnt Norton*), “human kind cannot bear very much reality”. The function of history, as it has now developed in the hands of academics, is to open the cupboard doors. A function of religion should be to give us the courage to do so, and face the consequences.

Writing of consequences, we cannot leave the matter of truth without a brief return to the question of knowledge, and of our distinction above of the “emic” and “etic” perspectives. Once we are conscious of this distinction, it is dishonest not to take full account of its consequences. So let us note the distinction some languages make between two forms of knowledge. I shall classify them according to their use (verbs *and* nouns when different).

TABLE OF VOCABULARY OF “KNOWLEDGE”

LANGUAGE	EMIC KNOWLEDGE (personal, subjective)	ETIC KNOWLEDGE (non-personal, objective)
English	know, knowledge, ken	know, knowledge; (wit)
French	connaître, connaissance	savoir, science
German	kennen, Kentnisse; Erkennen	wissen, Wissen
Greek	γνωρίζω, γνωσις, mod. γνώση	οἶδα (εἶδω), ἐπιστήμη, mod. ξέρω
Italian	conoscere, conoscenza	sapere, sapienza
Latin	cognosco, cognitio	sapio, sapientia; video; scio, scientia
Sanskrit	jñā, jñāna	vid, vidyā
Spanish	conocer, conocimiento	saber

The etic terms here relate to “knowledge” in the sense of “facts”, things that can be demonstrated and verified, scientifically, historically or according to laws of evidence applying in law. Common-sense knowledge. The study of such knowledge

is epistemology. We sense the permanence of such known things, although in reality they remain subject to intellectual fashion and social convention, and to new insights of scholars and thinkers. Even these certain facts are mutable. Science advances, and replaces old “scientific truths” which new ones. Historians find new evidence, rejecting older explanations in favour of new ones, and these in turn are displaced, and so *ad infinitum*. Legal proof of guilt can be overturned on appeal. Post-modernism has cast further doubts on what can only be described as the *relative* objectivity of this kind of knowledge.

The emic terms lack this relative objectivity altogether. Emic knowledge is intuited, experienced, and felt—immediate rather than mediate (we might even say “begotten, not made”!)—and can only become seemingly objective truth by definition, as in formulation in a religious doctrine, which is axiomatic, and not open to question. For all their seeming immutability, even religious dogmas change over the centuries, through religious reformation and new theological insights. Plato held that this was true knowledge, while etic knowledge was deficient and transitory.

A problem can arise when the distinction noted here becomes fuzzy, as with the English terms “know”, “knowledge”, which are now used in both etic and emic contexts. The etic term “wit” with this sense has fallen into disuse except in the idiom “to wit”, meaning “for example”.

Related to the issue of truth is the content of that truth¹. Is it the “literal” interpretation of a set of beliefs? The problem with the monotheistic religions, as I see it, is their implicit rejection of other models by virtue of their assent to the particular, the claim that history has moved in a unidirectional way precisely towards the fulfilment of this or that trajectory. Of course, they also conflict with each other on this very principle! This is no doubt a perfectly defensible position to adopt from an emic perspective. But as we have seen, the etic perspective is also to be taken seriously, and if the principle of universality is to be observed, as in my definition of religion above, then they fail, because of their mutually exclusive particularities. Appeals to revelation, with the implication that this provides an escape route from the implications of the biological and social necessity of religion, seem to me to be spurious. The alternative is to see them, as well as other religions, as *symbolic* structures, using myth, metaphor and analogy to address the human predicament. The comparability then seems less a matter of rival claims, but of mutual enrichment. The etic perspective does not on the whole demand a league table of different traditions.

Prospects

What of religion and the future? For a religion to have a future, it must learn to live with science. It has had a chequered past. Many religions, with their archaic cosmologies, have had difficulty adjusting to the modern scientific world-view. Perhaps the most notorious Christian example of this was the treatment of Galileo, forced to recant in 1633, when he claimed that the Earth orbited the Sun. He had the last word: “*E pur si muove!*” And yet Copernicus had *already* put things right in 1543 in *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium!* A similar crisis arose in 1859, with the publication of Charles Darwin’s book *The Origin of Species*. But, with exceptions in some of its

¹ Ironically, on the day I posted this, I read the following in *The Guardian* (16 November 2016): “In the era of Donald Trump and Brexit, *Oxford Dictionaries* has announced that ‘post-truth’ is its international word of the year” (Alison Flood, p. 1).

subdivisions, Christianity has adjusted tolerably well to the new intellectual world-order. Science and religion are in dialogue in many universities in the Anglo-Saxon world, although the rise of pseudo-science, in the form of “creationism” or “intelligent design”, is a worrying trait in some North American institutions. But I am sanguine: reason *will* prevail in the face of such obscurantism.

As well as a social species, we are an emotional and aesthetic species. At its best, religion draws on these dimensions of human experience and speaks to every level of our psyche, enriching and in turn being enriched, not just by intellectual advances, but in such important areas as psychotherapy, medical ethics, and human rights. It does not have the monopoly here, but has learnt to work in dialogue with secular engagement in such concerns, the *emic* in collaboration with the *etic*, contributing powerfully to our adjustment to the world in which we live.

Many aspects of religion, for example beliefs about death and its aftermath, are not even touched on here. Space permits only the briefest sketch of what is perhaps the most complex aspect of human society, which has permeated all thinking and behaviour from the dawn of human history, hard-wired into our very constitution.

This paper has attempted to cover, all too briefly, a wide range of ideas concerning religion. It should by now be clear that there are very few areas in human social and political life where religion has not had an important part to play in history. To continue the list of aspects of human nature, we are a ritualising species: religion provides the framework, and survives in the background even of modern secular ritual and ceremonial. We are a linguistic species; we are a singing species; we are a literate species; we are a self-aware, conscious species.

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